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The President's Decision

Probably no recent interchange of views has evoked more comment than the series of meetings President Kennedy has been holding with leading Republicans and Democrats.

"What's he telling them?" is a question that seems to occur to everyone.

Naturally no certain answers are available aside from the announced purpose, which is to fill in both his leading friends and adversaries on the situation in Cuba and Laos. But it is possible to surmise that much of what he is discussing is known to all, even if some of it is not.

The President is probably saying that even though a National Security Council meeting was not held just before the Cuban invasion, that some of the nation's wisest military leaders concurred in the five-star Cuban fiasco.

He is no doubt pinpointing where Cuban freedom fighters were trained, how they assisted in the landing, and revealing the fact that after the landing faltered, the U.S. went in and took some Cubans off the beaches. Most of the remnants of the invasion force are now in cold storage on a tiny island off Puerto Rico.

The President is no doubt also going into the intelligence failure: How a faulty estimate was made concerning the reaction of the Cuban people, the amount of arms at Castro's disposal, and the effectiveness of the free Cuba forces in the swamps. This failure may have come about in part because of the decision of the CIA to actually hold captive the leaders of the Peoples Revolutionary Movement in Florida, not inform them of the pending invasion, and thus eschew the aid the group could have given the invasion through the use of the organization's extensive underground apparatus.

The President is also no doubt exploring the possibility of changing the role of the CIA — and the most likely development is that the CIA will retain its intelligence gathering function, but the implementation of secret missions, such as Cuba, will be entrusted to another agency. This is the system used by the British to prevent political desires from warping the intelligence report.

There is another aspect of the presidential discussion and this revolves around the advice he is seeking. Every major leader in the country has been given the chance to express his views now, not after upcoming events. Taking the leaders of the nation into confidence will of course not still criticism, but at least it will make it informed criticism. Thus it is not a question of trying to muzzle the Republican leadership, because after all this is not the real reason GOP criticism has been couched in a modulated tone. Political memories are not so short that all can not remember that the President inherited the mess in Laos and Cuba, although most assuredly, the President has not improved our position in the Caribbean.

In Cuba, there is some evidence that a different course would have been worth trying several years ago. This was a thought we expressed at the time; we still believe it to be so. The U.S. in past years has pumped some \$300,000,000 a year into Laos, contrasted with the \$10,000,000 a year the U. S. gave Batista along with no particular urging to reform. (This excludes the sugar bonus Cuba received from the U. S.) It would seem to us that Castro initially had no overwhelming ideological commitment to communism, and was more nearly an opportunist (a slightly unbalanced one at that).

been persuaded that the U. S. could help him in his land reform program, and one who could have been persuaded that there are easier ways to stay in office than the one he has chosen. Perhaps this effort would have failed, but the point is that it wasn't really tried. It is reported in Washington that the sugar interests influenced the President to take a tepid view of Castro from the start, and it will be recalled that when Castro first visited New York, very soon after coming to power, there was no invitation from the White House. Moscow would not have made a mistake like that. All of this now helps us very little, but it is something we should not forget as we ponder the next step.

It is harsh, but true, to say that the President compounded the whole situation by an operation that failed — and in the face of growing evidence that time had begun to run out for the bearded dictator. The difficulty now is that any further Cuban adventures can commit us to a "sphere of influence" approach.

Because the U. S. furnishes the friendly governments of Turkey and Pakistan with military aid, it would be risky to move into Cuba with the Marines, not because Khrushchev would rain rockets as he has threatened, but because he would be provided with an excuse to move into Turkey and Pakistan and other areas of the world which have a common border with Russia, and which are supplied by U. S. military aid. China would no doubt act likewise, and this is the practical disadvantage of the sphere of influence theory.

This is also why the statement by the Department of State late last week: "Communism in the Western Hemisphere is not negotiable" is a singularly stupid one. It is like Khrushchev saying that all the countries in the Eastern Hemisphere must be Communist irrespective of the wishes of the people. What the U. S. could say, and perhaps one day will say, is that dictatorship in the Western Hemisphere is intolerable.

Thus, as we view this complicated globe, it would seem that the U. S. has a clear cut legal position in Laos, but would or will be hard put to defend it; the U. S. has virtually no legal position in Cuba, although it could walk in with the Marines tomorrow. Complicating it all is the prevalent view of many Americans that Castro must be uprooted at all costs, but that Laos is far away, and doesn't want to fight (which is true), and may not be worth sacrificing that many American lives to defend (which probably isn't true).

These are the questions which without doubt the President has posed to General Eisenhower, Attorney Nixon, General MacArthur, et al, following up with the present unponderable: "The United States is pledged to defend Laos by treaty, should we do it?"

As the President has said, "the hour is late." Perhaps it is too late. Perhaps the decision we are discussing has already been taken. But we believe that if there is any consensus among those with whom the President has talked it may well have come down to this: There is not much that can be done now about Cuba in the way of a major move; in Laos, the failure to get a prompt cease fire should be met with armed U. S. force.

The essential fact to remember about Laos is that the President has said we are committed to defend it, and this is what the